
Three Kinds of Semantic Resonance

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Abstract

This presentation suggests some reasons why lexicographers of the future will need to pay more attention to phraseology and non-literal meaning. It argues that not only do words have literal meaning, but also that much meaning is non-literal, being lexical, i.e. metaphorical or figurative, experiential, or intertextual.

Keywords: lexical resonance; experiential resonance; intertextual resonance

1. Introduction

Monolingual dictionaries aim to explain word meaning. In the English-speaking world at least, “explaining the meaning of a word” has been a task associated for at least 260 years with an assumption that each word has one or more literal meanings – denotations – each of which can be explained in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions for set membership. A definition of the word *tiger*, it was assumed, would be a statement of conditions that would identify all and only tigers. Such assumptions can be traced back at least as far as the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1702-4).

During the 20th century, and especially since 1970, work in philosophy of language, anthropology, cognitive linguistics, and corpus linguistics has called into question all such assumptions. The philosopher Hilary Putnam (1970) argued that traditional theories of meaning “radically falsify” the properties of ordinary everyday words such as *lemon* and *tiger*, insofar as such theories require (or appear to require) a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a tiger or a lemon. At about the same time, the anthropologist Eleanor Rosch developed cognitive prototype theory, arguing that human beings build concepts around prototypes, rather than by defining conditions for set membership. The cognitive linguist George Lakoff argued that “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The corpus linguist John Sinclair drew attention to the tension between what he called “the terminological tendency” (the tendency of words like ‘elephant’ to have an identifiable meaning in isolation) and “the phraseological tendency”, where the meaning of a word is dependent on the context in which it is used. An example (from Hanks, 2012) of a word whose meaning is phraseologically determined is ‘shower’. Is a shower a weather event or a fixture in your bathroom? More fundamentally, is its grammatical function that of a noun or a verb? Until we know the context in which ‘shower’ is being used on any given occasion, we cannot even begin to answer such questions. Sinclair went on to argue (1998) that “many, if not most, meanings require the presence of more than one word for their normal realization”.

Lexicography has been slow to respond to these developments. Only the Cobuild series of dictionaries, of which Sinclair was editor-in-chief, made a serious attempt to identify patterns of phraseology associated with the different sense of content words. The first edition of the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1987) was the first dictionary to be “driven” by corpus evidence. The explanations attempt to identify informally the phraseology associated with each meaning of each word, and the examples are taken directly from corpus data.

It seems clear from all this that future dictionaries must be built (or at least amended) on new foundations. Not only must any new dictionary take account of phraseology, but also metaphor and other kinds of creative use. In Hanks (2012, 2013) I have argued that a natural language is a system of human behaviour governed by not one but two systems of rules. The first set of rules govern norms – utterances (or aspects of utterances) that are “normal” – i.e. conventional in wording and meaning, being grammatically, semantically, and collocationally well-formed. The second set of rules govern creative uses of words.

In this presentation, I explore aspects of creativity in association with the use of words. I ask, what should dictionaries do about this aspect of language? Creativity can be associated with cognitive resonance. Three kinds of cognitive resonance are identified. Examples are given, taken from corpus data and from other literature. They are:

- **Lexical resonance** (including linguistic metaphor and other kinds of figurative language)
- **Experiential resonance** (words and phrases such as summer, which activate sensory memory)
- **Intertextual resonance** (words and phrases taken from previous users, ranging from Shakespeare and the Bible and other great writers, to the causal or imaginative coinages made by friends, family, and colleagues).

Examples of each kind of resonance are discussed, along with some possible implications for lexicography. A variety of possible actions that might be taken by dictionaries, especially on-line dictionaries, are considered, illustrating the rich cognitive potential of ordinary words.

2. Literal Meaning

The first duty of every dictionary is to give an account of the basic, literal meaning of content words (as opposed to function words such as determiners and auxiliary verbs, where the emphasis needs to be on explaining usage – linguistic function – rather than meaning). Accounting for literal meaning is harder than it may seem at first sight.

What are the criteria for literal meaning? The following criteria have been proposed in dictionaries and in the literature.

- **Etymology or historical priority**

This is the defining criterion favoured by many traditional dictionaries, but it is unsatisfactory. Historical priority cannot be taken as the main criterion for literalness. If it were, there would be surprising consequences. For example, the ‘literal’ meaning of a word would have to be ‘the meanings of the letters of which it is composed’, for the etymon of the English word *literal* is Latin *literalis* ‘of or pertaining to letters’. This is clearly nonsense. Whatever the literal meaning of a word may be, it rarely has anything to do with the letters used to spell it.

By the same criterion, the literal meaning of the word *subject* would be ‘something thrown under’ and of *object* ‘something thrown in the way’, for these are the original meanings of the elements of the corresponding Latin compound terms, which were formed centuries ago. Facts such as these may be of interest to historians of meaning change, but should not concern modern lexicographers. The notion that the oldest uses of a word guarantees understanding its meaning is a pernicious myth. The conventional relationships between words and their meanings are, and always have been, as variable as the forms of the words themselves.

- **Concrete vs. abstract**

If a linguistic expression has both a concrete meaning and an abstract one, the abstract one is normally a metaphorical exploitation of the concrete one. This seems satisfactory as far as it goes, but not all abstract senses of words are metaphorical. The word *idea*, for example, has no concrete sense. Its literal meaning is necessarily abstract.

- **Frequency**

It has sometimes been proposed that the most frequent sense of a term must be its literal meaning. This is untenable. By any other definition of metaphor, it often happens that, in non-specialist documents, the conventional metaphorical sense of a word (e.g. launch) is much more frequent than the comparable literal sense: Thus, *launching a product* and *launching a campaign* are more common than *launching a missile* or *launching a boat*, but still it seems reasonable to regard the former pair as metaphorical and the latter as literal.

- **Syntagmatics**

The syntagmatics of metaphorical uses of a word are typically much more constrained than the literal sense(s) of the same word. The word ‘torrent’, for example, is used in a wide variety of syntagmatic contexts to denote a mountain stream that rushes intermittently down a hillside, but metaphorical uses – where the meaning, broadly, is ‘a large quantity’ – are more restricted. Examples include *the rain came down in torrents* and *a torrent of abuse*. More extensive corpus-driven studies of the syntagmatics of metaphor are needed for this criterion to be satisfactorily explored.

- **Resonance**

According to Alice Deignan (2005), who is famous for her corpus-driven studies of metaphor, a metaphor is a “non-core use” of a word expressing “a perceived relationship with the core meaning of the [same] word.” The claim here is that if one sense of an expression resonates semantically with another sense, then it is metaphorical, and if there is no such resonance, it is literal. *Launching an advertising campaign*, *launching an attack on an enemy stronghold*, and *launching a new product on to the market* are very common expressions, but they can be classed as metaphors despite their high frequency, insofar as they resonate with more literal, more concrete expressions such as *launching a boat*, *launching a satellite*, and *launching a missile*.

Two points are worth noting here. The first is that a literal meaning may be of quite recent origin. For example, there is no mention of *launching a satellite* in the *American College Dictionary* of 1947, for the simple reason that at that date rocket technology had only just been invented and Wernher von Braun was still being denazified prior to becoming an American citizen.

The second noteworthy point is that not all metaphors resonate equally for every user of a language. What one regards as metaphorical, another may regard as literal – so, strictly speaking, it makes sense for metaphor analysts to think in terms of ‘resonance potential’ rather than resonance tout simple.

3. Lexical Resonance

We now come to the first of our three types of resonance, namely lexical resonance. Lexical resonance is a semantic force that contributes to the meaning of metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech. A simple example of a well-established metaphor is the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s speech in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1960, in which he observed:

1. The **wind of change** is blowing through this continent. Whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.

Macmillan may or may not have been the originator of this metaphor. For present purposes, that is an irrelevant question. The point here is that, since 1960, the metaphor has become established as a conventional expression in English, and lexicographers must decide what to do about it. A typical more recent example from the British National Corpus is 2:

2. A **wind of change** had already begun to blow at Newport Pagnell.

Supporting evidence of its conventionality lies in the extent to which the metaphor has been exploited in new ways, for example 3 and 4:

3. The **winds of neo-liberalism** are [were, in 1990] blowing a gale through Prague.
4. For some, **the chill wind of competition** is again blowing through their offices.

Dictionary editors must consider whether (and if so, how) to represent such metaphors and the conventions that underlie them. They are themselves exploitations of an exploitation, for Macmillan’s famous phrase was itself a metaphorical exploitation of an underlying convention. Sentences in which the subject is the noun *wind* or one of its many hyponyms – *breeze*, *gale*, *hurricane*, *typhoon*, etc. – are among most frequent and most stable uses of the verb *blow*. “Stable”, because it is reasonable to suppose that, even if in future centuries the winds of linguistic change may blow away the whole metaphorical superstructure that we have just discussed, English speakers will still be talking about the wind blowing. Typical phraseology of the verb *blow* is as in 5 and 6:

5. The wind blew the fence down.
6. A gale was blowing.

These two sentences are literal – as literal as is possible, given the resources of ordinary English, of discussing the events and phenomena in question. There is no simpler way of expressing the same meaning. Macmillan, on the other hand, could have expressed his meaning more literally, though less memorably, by saying, “Things are changing.”

3.1 Exploiting norms

Established phraseological norms are there to be exploited, not merely conformed to. Dictionaries rarely illustrate exploitations, nor should they. 7 is a journalistic example, describing a politician facing almost certain electoral defeat:

7. “The night is young,” he quipped, **brandishing** a smile for the cameras which contrasted sharply with the drawn and tear-stained faces of his aides.

Normal phraseology of the verb *brandish* requires that the direct object should be something like a *sword*. People who brandish swords are making threatening gestures. It is legitimate to infer, therefore, that there is something threatening about this politician’s smile. Dictionaries (naming no names) that define *brandish* as “to shake or wave”, with no mention of a threatening manner, have done only part of the job. This is a fairly typical failing of pre-corpus dictionaries, now alas, being replicated ad nauseam in freely available on-line dictionaries and hand-held devices. On the other hand, we may also infer that there is something defiant in the politician’s smile in 7. This interpretation is, arguably, more circumstantial. Every act of brandishing may be interpreted as threatening, but perhaps very few are defiant. To confirm this hypothesis and to decide what lexicographical action is appropriate, comparison of dozens of different corpus uses would be required.

3.2. Joyce’s Exploitations

The great Irish writer James Joyce wrote a few short stories and poems, but is remembered chiefly for two huge novels, which in their day were classified as extremes of experimental avant-garde. Both works mercilessly exploit the conventions of the English language.

The first of them, *Ulysses*, written in 1918-1922, is noted, among other things, for its numerous attempts to represent the **stream of consciousness** of its characters. Typically it does this by exploiting the conventional syntactic structure of English.

Wikipedia gives the following example of stream of consciousness from *Ulysses*, in which Molly Bloom is trying to get to sleep:

a quarter after what an unearthly hour I suppose theyre just getting up in China now combing out their pigtails for the day we’ll soon have the nuns ringing the angelus theyve nobody coming in to spoil their sleep except an odd priest or two for his night office the alarmlock next door at cockshout clattering the brains out of itself let me see if I can doze off 1 2 3 4 5 what kind of flowers are those they invented like the stars the wallpaper in Lombard street was much nicer the apron he gave me was like that something only I only wore it twice better lower this lamp and try again so that I can get up early.

The point here, for present purposes, is that, although the syntax is extremely irregular, the lexical items are very normal. The only exceptions are *alarmlock* and *cockshout*. Neither of these words is in OED. Should they be? I think not, because they are exploitations of norms, not semantic norms in themselves. Therefore, instead of adding these unusual words themselves, which are *hapax legomena*, to a great national dictionary, what is important is to record the conventions on which they depend.

Alarmlock seems to be nothing more than a pun on *alarm clock*, evidently denoting some kind of burglar alarm, which, then as now, would go off (or be set off) at inopportune moments, to the great annoyance of neighbours. Possibly, *alarmlock* is a conventional term in Irish English, but I doubt it. If other examples are found, then an argument for including it in OED could be constructed. *Cockshout* is more interesting. It is evidently a pun on the Elizabethan term *cockshut* or *cockshoot*, defined in OED as ‘twilight’ and supported by the following citations among others:

1597 Shakespeare *Richard III* v. v. 23 Thomas the Earle of Surrey and himselfe,
Much about cockshut time..Went through the army cheering vp the soldiors.

1611 R. Cotgrave *Dict. French & Eng. Tongues* *Brune*, the euening twilight, or
edge of the euening; cockshoot time.

Joyce’s term *cockshout* seems to be idiosyncratic (i.e. unique to Joyce). Although in form it closely resembles the Elizabethan term, the meaning can only be a synonym for *cock-crow*, which denotes dawn rather than twilight.

We may note in passing that OED’s entry for *cock-crow* needs attention. Although almost all of the citations clearly show that it is an expression denoting a time of day, the OED entry, which dates from 1891 and has not yet been revised, gives only a reference to *cock-crowing*, which is defined only as “the crowing of a cock”, with no mention of a time of day.

4. Experiential Resonance

Poets, more than any other kind of writer, typically use resonant expressions to get their message across. Using resonance is not a necessary condition of being a poet. Indeed, some poets have deliberately eschewed poetical devices – the tricks of the trade. An apparent example is William Carlos Williams’ imagist poem (written in 1934):

This is just to say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me

they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold.

Is there any resonance here? It seems to me that part of the effectiveness of this minimalist piece of writing lies in the fact that some of the content words – in particular *plums*, *icebox*, *breakfast*, *delicious*, and *sweet* – have experiential resonance for the reader. They are evocative of pleasant eating experiences that most if not all of us have enjoyed. Dictionary entries for these words should contribute to this, not merely state facts such as that *plum* denotes the fruit of the tree *Prunus prunus* and in some contexts the tree itself.

This experiential resonance is exploited in the poem (for, despite any appearance to the contrary, it *is* a poem) in two ways. Firstly, the mock apology of “Forgive me”. Here, there is nothing that the dictionary can do to assist the interpretation of the poem. It would be wrong to attempt to go beyond the standard dictionary definition, e.g. “to stop feeling angry or resentful towards (someone) for an offence, flaw, or mistake”. Perhaps dictionaries here are being a bit heavy-handed, because the phrase “Forgive me” has become conventional in circumstances of comparatively mild breaches of social convention, for example when disagreeing with someone. This, too, can be classed as experiential. Finally, the last word of the poem, ‘cold’, contrasts effectively with the evocation of a pleasant eating experience. It contributes a mild surprise at the very end. Here again, however, there is probably little or nothing that a dictionary can or should do. It is a particular fact about Williams’s poem that the plums are asserted to have been cold, having been taken out of the icebox, not a general experiential fact about plums, like their sweetness. As it happens, the semantic relationship between this final word and the word *icebox* in mid-poem contributes semantic coherence.

I worry slightly about the definition of *icebox*. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “a chilled box or cupboard for keeping something cold, especially food.” This is not actually wrong, but we might quibble with the defining term ‘cupboard’, which seems to me to be a throwback to Victorian technology, before the invention of refrigerators. In modern English, is *icebox* anything more than an American synonym for *refrigerator*?

5. Intertextual Resonance

In an established literary language such as English, almost every utterance contains phraseology that owes something to preceding writers and speakers. It is generally impossible to trace all the components of an utterance that are borrowed from colleagues and neighbours, though that is how some metaphors and similes – often but not always felicitous ones – become established as conventional phrases of English. If a modern person says, “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof”, the phraseology is so unusual that it is easy to trace it back to Chapter 6, verse 34, of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew in the King James Version of the Bible:

“Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day *is* the evil thereof.”

A modern phrase expressing the same sentiment is “Take each day as it comes”, which is of less certain provenance. The tremendous influence of the Bible and Shakespeare on the lexis and phraseology of English are well known and have been discussed in many places, so I

shall say no more about them here, beyond the passing comment that the decline of Christian belief and Christian teaching in England (which we may or may not regard as a cause for regret) have entailed a decline in familiarity with the roots of English lexis and phraseology, which I for one certainly do regret.

The master of all exploitations was James Joyce. Having finished writing *Ulysses* in 1922, Joyce spent all but the last couple of years of his life writing his other great work, *Finnegans Wake*. This extraordinary work is a massive challenge to lexicographers. Almost every content word in it is not an English word in itself, but rather an exploitation of one or more (often several) ordinary words.

Here is Joyce's imagined account (or parody, or personification) of the mutually uncomprehending first encounter between a native, Gaelic-speaking Irish inhabitant of Dublin and one of the Viking invaders, who founded the city (with references thrown in to the Dutch settlers in South Africa, and a lurking Englishman – a Saxon – in the background):

In the name of Anem this carl on the kopje in pelted thongs a parth a lone who the joebiggar be he? Forshapen his pigmaid hoagshead, shroonk his plodsfoot. He hath locktoes, this short-shins, and, Obeold that's pectoral, his mammamuscles most moustierous. It is slaking nuncheon out of some thing's brain pan. Me seemeth a dragon man. He is almonthst on the kiep fief by here, is Comestipple Sacksoun, be it junipery or febrew-ery, marracks or alebrill or the ramping riots of pouriose and froriose. What a quhare soort of a mahan. It is evident the mich-indaddy. Lets we overstep his fire defences and these kraals of slitsucked marrogbones. (Cave!) He can prapsposterus the pil-lory way to Hirculos pillar. Come on, fool porterfull, hosiered women blown monk sewer? Scuse us, chorley guy! You tollerday donsk? N. You tolkatiff scowegian? Nn. You spigotty anglease? Nnn. You phonio saxo? Nnnn. Clear all so! 'Tis a Jute. Let us swop hats and excheck a few strong verbs weak oach eather yapyazzard abast the bloody creeks.

Jute. — Yutah!

Mutt. — Mukk's pleasurad.

Jute. — Are you jeff?

Mutt. — Somehards.

Jute. — But you are not jeffmute?

Mutt. — Noho. Only an utterer.

Jute. — Whoa? Whoat is the mutter with you?

Mutt. — I became a stun a stummer.

Jute. — What a hauhauhauhdibble thing, to be cause! How, Mutt?

Mutt. — Aput the buttle, surd.

Jute. — Whose poddle? Wherein?

Mutt. — The Inns of Dungtarf where Used awe to be he.

Jute. — You that side your voise are almost inedible to me. Become a bitskin more wiseable, as if I were you.

In the words of an Irish critic, whose name I have not been able to trace, speaking on a TV show in the 1970s, "He took the English language and threw it back at them, scrambled." However, with comparatively few exceptions, the syntax and the function words used in *Finnegans Wake* are normal and conventional. This contrasts with *Ulysses*, which exploits the

norms of English syntax more than the norms of English lexis. An indispensable aid to interpretation of *Finnegans Wake* is Roland McHugh's *Annotations*, which provides readers (including lexicographers) with a wealth of information about the innumerable references to and exploitations of the words and phraseology of earlier writers, street balladeers, advertisements, and who-knows-what else.

6. Putting it All Together: the Opening Lines of *The Waste Land*

The Waste Land, by T. S. Eliot, was published in 1922. It is, perhaps, not immediately apparent to the first-time reader that it is (in part at least) a lament for the peaceful, comfortable, prosperous, cultured Europe that had just been destroyed by the "great powers" in the First World War. As everyone who has read it knows, *The Waste Land* is stuffed full of intertextual references and outright quotations, drawing on the words of writers in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Italian, French, and German, ranging from the Hindu Upanishads, Homer, and Dante to Huxley and Wagner. It also contains many highly personal references to Eliot's own experiences, some of which may not be recoverable, but most of which have a general as well as a personal resonance.

The first section of the poem, *The Burial of the Dead*, begins thus:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.
 Winter kept us warm, covering
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
 A little life with dried tubers.
 Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
 With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
 And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
 And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
 Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
 And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,
 My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
 And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
 Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
 In the mountains, there you feel free.
 I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

What is going on here, and is any of it relevant to lexicography? Let us look in particular to lines 8 to 12. To appreciate these lines, it is helpful to know that Eliot had visited Bavaria as a tourist in the summer of 1911. The Colonnade and the Hofgarten are public places in the city of Munich. The Starnbergersee is a lake in Bavaria, where one morning in 1886, the body of "mad" King Ludwig was found dead floating in shallow water at the side of the lake. His death was possibly a suicide, more probably a political murder. Ludwig's spending habits were notorious. Not only did he commission the building of a fabulous (and fabulously expensive) fairy-tale castle (Neuschwanstein, in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps) and an almost equally expensive opera house devoted exclusively to the operas of Richard Wagner, but also, for some years before his untimely death, Ludwig had devoted a substantial proportion of the annual budget of the kingdom of Bavaria to

supporting his idol, Richard Wagner, paying his debts, paying off irate husbands, and keeping him in the life style to which both of them considered that the greatest living composer and dramatist ought to be accustomed. This is relevant here, because Wagner has a role in *The Waste Land*. A few lines after the reference to the Starnbergersee, Eliot quotes verbatim) a poignant moment from *Tristan und Isolde*:

Frisch weht der Wind
 Der Heimat zu.
 Mein irisch Kind,
 Wo weilest du?

And a few lines further on:

Oed' und leer das Meer.

It is for teachers of literature to discuss how and why Eliot uses such intertextual and interlingual references--perhaps in order to convey the deep sense of loss and emptiness following the war. Lexicography can help here by providing background information that is of general rather than specific relevance--for example by summarizing at least some of the associations of names like Starnbergersee, going further than flatly stating that it is "a lake in southern Bavaria", or ignoring it completely, on the grounds that names are not words.

With the advent of the Internet, the space constraints that tormented lexicographers of my generation have disappeared. This new freedom should not be regarded as a licence to rabbit on interminably, however. In place of the practical constraints imposed by printed books, we need to observe new constraints imposed by self-discipline, selectivity, and judgments about relevance. A modern online dictionary is – or can aspire to be – a collective cultural index. It can be argued that any large online dictionary of English should contain short, succinct entries for lexical items such as the personal names of prominent individuals – Wagner and Ludwig II being cases in point – and for place names such as the Hofgarten in Munich and Starnbergersee.

On the other hand, there is no place in such a dictionary, however limitless the available space, for the lady who so vehemently protects her status as an ethnic German from Lithuania. The encounter with her must remain for ever no more than a trace of a personal and private resonance in the now departed mind of T. S. Eliot. Modern readers can share in this only to the extent that we have experienced people who make vehement assertions about their ethnic status.

By contrast, Eliot's references to winter and summer are a matter of public resonance. It is important that dictionaries should not only state the meaning of these terms as division of the calendar year, but also indicate their connotations.

OED defines *summer* as "the second and warmest season of the year, coming between spring and autumn; reckoned astronomically from the summer solstice (21 June) to the autumnal equinox (22 or 23 September); in popular use comprising in the northern hemisphere the period from mid-May to mid-August."

6.1 Interpreting Resonant Expressions

It is important, for interpretation of the experiential resonance of innumerable English texts, to say that summers are warm and pleasant, while winters are cold and nasty. Real-world facts such as that many people may enjoy winter, with bright sun on crisp snow and the prospect of skiing holidays, etc., while others may hate summer, are irrelevant. To qualify as an English speaker, you have to know that stereotypical summers are warm and pleasant. Most dictionaries that I checked say that the weather in summer is warm or hot, but none go as far as saying that summers are pleasant. Of course, this is justified because in many parts of the world nowadays, summer is an unpleasantly hot season.

Let us now, consider gorillas and folk beliefs. OED defines *gorilla* as “The largest of anthropoid apes, a native of western equatorial Africa; it closely resembles man in its structure, is very powerful and ferocious, and arboreal in its habits.”

Is “ferocious” correct? We now know better, perhaps. Gorillas are large and powerful, but they are gentle giants. The notion that they are ferocious is a folk belief, and needs to be recorded in dictionaries, but if ferocity is mentioned at all, a note of scepticism is called for:

- Cet animal est tres méchant;
Quand on l’attaque il se défend.
 - This animal is very malicious; when attacked it defends itself.
 - From a song, *La Ménagerie*, reported in *Hoyt's New Cyclopedia of Practical Quotations* (1922), p. 30.

Sense 1 of *gorilla* in *Collins English Dictionary* mentions the attributes ‘large’, ‘stocky’, and ‘massive’, but makes no mention of ‘ferocious’. Should ‘ferocious’ be mentioned at all in a dictionary entry for the word *gorilla*, since we now know that it is not true – i.e. not well justified as a matter of scientific fact? Perhaps surprisingly, the answer I would give is yes. *Collins English Dictionary* offers a solution to this quandary. Its sense 2 of *gorilla* reads: “*Informal*. A large, strong, and brutal-looking man.” When we examine the use of this word in the British National Corpus, we find examples such as the following:

A gorilla in a Top Shop suit called Nevil was looking for me. – Mike Ripley (1989), *Just another angel*.

His body was hairy, muscled, well-shaped, and when I saw him strip for bed he reminded me of a *gorilla* about to pounce upon its prey. – Jack Caplan (1991), *Memories of the Gorbals*.

The first of the Philip Marlowe books sees our hero hanging tough among the broads, bimbos and *gorillas* – a hard-smoking bourbon man who eschews armour in favour of a belted mac and a fedora. – Anon., in *Esquire* (1991).

Citations such as these support the notion that, although ill-justified in the real world, the folk belief that gorillas are huge, ferocious, brutal, and ugly survived long enough to create a conventional secondary meaning of the word.

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